

## **ABCs OF MENTAL TRAINING**

**By Aimee Kimball, PhD//Mental Training Consultant**

Stress is something that everyone will experience at some point in their lives. However, some stress is unavoidable or, at the very least, manageable. What I find is that many athletes have high levels of stress because they have never been taught ways to cope with or manage the events causing stress in their lives. This article will provide some quick tips to alleviating and avoid with stress.

**Stress Isn't Always Bad** It's true. Stress can be a good thing. Think of a time when you were up all night working on a paper and were totally stressed out about whether you were going to complete it by class the next day. While you may have had the assignment for weeks, you procrastinated until the last minute. Thus, the stress of it being due tomorrow got you moving. Without that stress, you'd have put it off another day. Additionally, stress can help us to focus better. If you have a really important meet or test coming up, in the days preceding it, you probably do everything you can to make sure you are prepared. So while the event might cause some stress, this stress in turn enables you to be fully prepared. Ultimately, stress can be both positive and negative. It all depends on how you view it.

**So What Is Stress?** We all can feel when we are stressed, but what causes those feelings is actually a result of our thinking. At its core, stress is basically the result of having a lot demanded of you yet you don't think you have what it takes to meet those demands. (Demands > Resources = Stress)

For example, if you have an away meet, mid-term exams, and a family function all on the same day, you realize you have a lot of time demands on your shoulders. If you perceive there is no way you can accomplish everything you need to in 24 hours, you will perceive that you don't have the resources (time) to do all of the things you need to, resulting in you being stressed. However, someone else with the same demands may acknowledge that they have time to study on the bus and that going to dinner with their family will provide a much needed study break. Because the second person believes they have the resources to handle the time demands, they experience less stress over the situation. Therefore, stress is a result of perceived demands and perceived resources.

**Preventing and Managing Stress** Because stress is caused from our perception of demands and our perception of available resources, the first step in managing stress is to reexamine your resources (time, money, support, etc.) and the perceived demands. Whenever you perceive a demand as stressful, think about your most relaxed friend and ask yourself, "Would she/he be stressed over this?" If not, ask yourself why. If you still think the "demands" (which can really be anything) are potentially stressful, ask yourself what all you have available to help you cope. Don't be afraid to ask for help and make sure you give yourself credit for being able to handle more than you think you can.

“To do” lists are also a necessary stress management technique, but there is a bit more to it than just listing everything you have to do. I suggest making note of both the time and energy required to get each of your tasks completed and doing the hardest ones first. Many people put off what they don’t want to do, but then it’s hanging over their head all week and creating stress just thinking about it. If you get the dreaded ones out of the way early, you may actually gain energy in knowing it’s completed. Additionally, some of your tasks may be good “floaters” and can be done at anytime. If you have 10 math problems to do, try to get two done before each class so you will have less homework that night.

One thing that causes people a lot of stress is unrealistic expectations, both of themselves as well as others. For example, if you don’t really get along with your coach and on a personality scale he’s a 3 out of 10 yet you expect him to interact with you like he’s an 8 or 9, you’re going to be stressed because you’ll always be disappointed, angry and frustrated. However, if he’s being hard on you and you realize that’s just who he is, it causes a lot less stress because you know what you’re in for and don’t expect much more from him. Therefore, if you align your expectations with reality you’ll be preventing stress.

Uncontrollable situations are also a major source of stress for many student-athletes. The stress prevention technique I like to help deal with these situations comes from the military. At West Point and other Army bases they teach their soldiers how to quickly assess stressful situations so they can act effectively and efficiently. Basically, they believe that a situation is either important or not and is either in your control or not. If it’s an important situation, you either need to fix it (if it’s in your control) or accept it (uncontrollable). If it’s not important, you either need to get rid of it (controllable) or ignore it (uncontrollable). So take a minute to list your stressors. If you don’t control it or it’s not important, cross it off your list. There’s no sense in worrying if you can’t do anything about it.

Finally, when it comes to preventing and managing your stress, make sure you have balance in your life. Think of all the things you do that drain energy from you on a daily basis. If you never stop to recharge yourself and replenish your energy, you will burnout. So every day make sure you take time to unwind and do something enjoyable to balance out any stressors you may have experienced.

**Stress is a State of Mind** While there are things that will undoubtedly cause us stress, we can cope with the emotions by doing things like seeking out social support, keeping a journal, crying, laughing and exercising. However, the best way to manage stress is to prevent it by using some of the techniques mentioned above. Ultimately, we all experience stress in different ways but, one thing that stays constant is that most people are about as happy as they choose to be.